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ABSTRACT

"The Ring Toss," a gum-print six-by-eight-inch photograph produced in 1899 and first published in 1903, has become one of photographer Clarence White's most noted images. It is an example of soft focus, or fuzzy pictorialism, a type of American art photography most practiced around the turn of the century. This analysis of the photograph in particular, and the fuzzy pictorialism movement in general, relates the image to larger social and cultural issues. Parallels between the photograph and a well-known painting by William Merritt Chase demonstrate the growing interest in using photography as art, rather than mere depiction. As a form of plagiarism, it represents the ambitions of a group of amateur American photographers at the end of the 19th century to lift photography to an art by copying the codes and conventions of painting. In its subject matter, it reaffirms bourgeois values and accepted meanings in a society upset by the new urban-industrial order. (SLD)

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ED 363 336

An Analysis of Clarence White's Photograph, "The Ring Toss"

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by
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The Ring Toss, a gum-print photograph produced in 1899 and first published in a 1903 edition of *Camera Work*, has become one of photographer Clarence White's most noted images (see Figure 1). In scholarly works detailing White's career, pictorial photography, or the early years of the Photo Secession, one often finds a full-page reproduction of White's *Ring Toss* standing as a sort of epitome of soft focus or 'fuzzy' pictorialism — a particular strand of American art photography most practiced around the turn of the century. This article is an analysis of White's *Ring Toss* in particular and 'fuzzy' pictorialism in general, using methods of the "discipline" of material culture oulined by Jules David Prown as well as historical and sociological study.[1]

The central question this article addresses is why so much late Victorian art photography centered around 'fuzzy' images of genteel women and children in leisure settings. Through an historically and sociologically grounded analysis of the photograph's form and content, White's portrayal of gender and class identity in *Ring Toss* will be discussed and related to larger social and cultural issues concerning class and gender in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Central to this discussion is the relationship between painters and photographers during the late Victorian era as well as the relationships of both groups of artists to American society and culture. To the late twentieth-century viewer, *The Ring Toss* may look static, overly constructed and ripe for a Freudian psychoanalytic-oriented reading: Three virginal young women, located in the undeveloped sexual environment of adolescence, throw ovarian/vaginal-like rings at phallic rods. They are playing or experimenting with notions of sexuality and gender relations — the ring toss is a metaphor for an element of the sexual tension between males and females. The nearly empty room symbolizes their as yet undeveloped libidinous state. The softness of the print indicates the dream-like metaphoric nature of the image's meaning.

Such a reading could have little to do with the meanings originally attached to the photograph in its late nineteenth-century context. When one considers historical and sociological factors, White's *Ring Toss* can be related to upper middle-class Victorian notions of childhood, leisure and gender identity. It is also a particularly revealing artifact concerning the development of art photography in America. While sexual tension may well be a part of White's image, the point of this article is to address social rather than psychoanalytic factors related to the image. The context of image production and reception is central to this article.

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Figure 1

Clarence White, *The Ring Toss,* 1899

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One striking element of White's six-by-eight-inch photograph is that it is a rather close imitation of William Merritt Chase's 1896 painting, *Ring Toss* (see Figure 2).[2] It is obvious White's ideas for the basic form and content of the photograph were not original. Chase's free brushwork is paralleled by White's use of the gum print process to soften features. The use of compositional space and tonal gradations is similar in both works, as is the subject matter — three prim girls, dressed in white gowns, playing ring toss in a large, open room.

There are, however, important differences between the Chase painting and White photograph. In the Chase painting, the girls are framed by what appear to be two different sized artist's canvases, one on a wheeled pedestal. The room is apparently a studio painter's work space — perhaps a part of Chase's Tenth Street Studio. Heavy drapery covers much of the background. In the White photograph, the girls are posed differently — two are seated in front of a large, luminous window with bright sunlight diffused through a sheer curtain. The ring toss game is partially out of the frame. The purpose of the room in White's photograph is more difficult to understand because the only discernible objects in it are a room divider off in one corner, a bench and the game pieces. The differences do not imply much of a sense of originality on White's part, but indicate the influence of other artists, particularly James Abbott McNeil Whistler, as well as the determinism of working within the particular medium of photography.

The form of White's *Ring Toss* dominates — shapes, tones, patterns of light and space interact to form a soft and delicate composition stressing asymmetrical balance. The genre-oriented content of the picture seems almost incidential. Despite most of the foreground being open space — a bare hardwood floor — balance is achieved through anchoring one corner of the foreground with part of the dark-toned ring toss game, the rest of it being cut out of the frame. This corner of the foreground is linked diagonally to the standing girl in a rather luminous white dress who anchors the upper right corner, along with deep shadows in the extreme background. The standing girl and the game in the lower left corner are linked through her attention being focused on the game and through the rings on the floor leading directly to her, seemingly from the game. The top left portion of the frame is dominated by the merged white shapes of the rectangular of the window and the triangle of the two girls on the bench. Both shapes are surrounded by deep shadows. The eye is drawn to them through the extreme brightness of the window and the leading lines of the floorboards in the foreground. The lower right corner of the print is anchored by an indistinguishable, cut-off black shape. Nothing in the print is sharply delineated.

White's *Ring Toss* is a display of light and form — of tonal variations and shapes. Its off-center design, the cut-off form of the game, the open space and soft tonal gradations indicate influences such as Whistler and his "Japanese-inspired compositional motifs."[3] In the room divider behind the standing girl, it even appears White has added a pattern of butterflies reminiscent of Whistler's butterfly monogram. Like Whistler's mother in *Arrangement in Gray and Black No. 1*, the three girls in White's photograph project no personality or emotion — each "becomes an object among objects." Because the emphasis is on the photograph's formal qualities, it, like Whistler's works, becomes above all a "decorative entity" — it is "art for the sake of art."[4]

White was also influenced by impressionism, in particular the American "tonalist impressionism" practiced by painters such as Thomas W. Dewing and Julian Alden Weir — artists also influenced by Whistler as well as the French barbizon school.[5] Unlike the bright colors of much impressionism, the colors in tonalist works were usually

muted — subdued by a controlled tonal range. Tonalist scenes were softened — often rather misty and darkened intimate images of rather immobile people in upper middle-class interiors. Tonalist works evoked particular moods — often a sort of meditative nostalgia.[6] Much of this is evident in White's *Ring Toss*. And just as he 'borrowed' from Chase, it appears White borrowed a specific configuration from Weir. One of the seated girls in White's photograph is posed almost exactly like Weir's wife in his 1888 painting *Idle Hours*.[7] What is particularly striking is how both White's girl and Weir's wife are not only posed similarly with arm outstretched and head canted, but both are positioned in front of a luminous, sunlit window with sheer curtains.

Why did White partake in such an overt form of 'plagiarism' as evidenced in *The Ring Toss*? The changing relationship of the medium of photography to society and the art world in the late nineteenth century provides much of the answer. In the late nineteenth century, using the camera as a tool in the production of art was nothing new. The use of photographs as guides for paintings was an accepted practice. Degas, Gauguin, Lautrec and Americans Thomas Eakins and the impressionist Theodore Robinson were among those painters using "study photographs." Scholars such as Van Deren Coke and Richard Boyle have written how the use of photographs may have helped lead to new conventions in painting such as distorted perspectives; emphasizing candid moments in poses and arrangements of objects; and focusing on light at particular moments.[8] White, however, was not interested in using photography as an aid in the production of paintings or sculpture. As an American pictorialist, he was interested in legitimizing photography as another branch of the fine arts. To him photography was art — it was more than a seemingly accurate two-dimensional representation of reality.

In the late nineteenth century, 'pictorialism' became a general term for art photography.[9] Unlike the burgeoning group of Victorian amateur snapshooters interested in family photographs, the pictorialists used the camera for creative expression. From its beginnings in the 1850s with photographers such as O. G. Rejlander and H. P. Robinson to its solidification around the turn of the century with organizations such as the 1892 British Linked Ring Brotherhood and the 1902 American Photo Secession, pictorialism was a movement deeply influenced by contemporary painting. Pictorialists not only borrowed the subjects and compositions of painting, but felt their work should be judged according to the same aesthetic criteria as painting.

The preoccupation with paralleling painting led many pictorialists to turn to extreme forms of manipulation, such as carefully staging subjects to using the 'fuzzy' gum-bichromate process, in which actual pigment instead of silvers forms the final image. Because so much painting of the time was 'fuzzy' in some manner, droves of pictorialists began producing soft prints. Because the average person expects to see 'sharp' photographs, producing 'fuzzy' images was a clear statement separating snapshooters from the aspiring pictorialists.

But the pictorialists were also influenced by their origins in the broad amateur photography movement which started in the 1880s with technical improvements in photography. Improvements such as dry plates, faster emulsions, celluloid film and pocket cameras led millions of Victorian bourgeoisie to take up the newly simplified medium of photography as a hobby.[10] In this sense, amateur photography in general and pictorialism in particular were a part of the 'aesthetic movement' of the period — that great retreat from the 'vulgar' and 'material' industrial environment to the refined interiors of Victorian homes. Because of

this meeting of the bourgeois class and photography in the context of the aesthetic movement, many subjects of pictures were naturally focused on the private sphere — family gatherings, pets, the beach, mothers, children, and picturesque scenery. Many of the pictorialists of the late nineteenth century began as amateurs making snapshots of these private-sphere subjects. When they moved on to more 'artistic' pursuits, they did not abandon such subjects, but, like the painters who were also making images of the private sphere, they idealized them by enveloping them in a concern for formal pictorial qualities.

The reform ideas of the aesthetics movement helped lead to such bourgeois photographic pursuits as carefully planned vacations to photogenic places, art history studies, museum trips and the organization of clubs, exhibitions and periodicals. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of organized amateur groups increased twenty-fold — many were subsidized in some fashion by the photographic industry, Kodak in particular. Several of these amateur groups developed into elitist institutions organized similarly to painters' groups and the organizations supporting painting.

But unlike the mechanisms of 'high art,' the pictorialist organizations, journals and exhibitions were not able to adequately support the photographers. Occasionally popular magazines such as *Scribner's* or the *Century* bought an image for $5 to $15, but few collectors in the 1890s purchased photographs. Still, connections between the pictorialist photographers and painters were occasionally forged through the exhibitions and periodicals of elitist photographic groups such as the Camera Club of New York and the Photographic Society of Philadelphia. For example, in the Photographic Society of Philadelphia's first 'Philadelphia Salon' exhibition of 1898, W. M. Chase was asked to serve as a judge.

Clarence White began producing pictures in this milieu.[11] As a child in Ohio, his interest in a career of painting was discouraged by his parents. After high school, White became a bookkeeper for a grocery firm in Newark, Ohio. He began taking photographs in 1893 — the year of his honeymoon trip to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He reportedly was fascinated with the works of major artists — Whistler and the American impressionists in particular. The Exposition featured works by each of the future members of the 1897 group, 'The Ten American Painters,' as well as six Whistler oils and numerous etchings.[12] In 1898 White formed the Newark Camera Club, had reproductions of his photographs published in the national periodical, *Photographic Times*, and exhibited at the first Philadelphia Salon. During this time he met Alfred Stieglitz and F. Holland Day. In 1899, the year he produced *The Ring Toss*, 122 of his photographs were exhibited at the New York Camera Club. White eventually became a member of the Linked Ring and helped found the Photo Secession as well as other pictorialist organizations. He eventually moved to New York in 1906 and became a professional photographer and instructor. In his later years, White became a very influential teacher of such documentary and commercial photographers as Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Paul Outerbridge Jr. and Anton Bruehl. Although he was open to alternative styles, he never completely abandoned the 'fuzzy' approach.[13]

In the early years of White's photographic career, most of the images he produced were quite similar to *The Ring Toss*. Produced as either gum or platinum prints, his images always stressed formal qualities such as balance or tone. They were usually 'fuzzy' representations of idyllic, tranquil scenes of his friends and family — usually children or young women. In his images, children and young women play instruments, gather fruit, and stroll through landscapes bathed in soft, early

morning light. The women and children are carefully arranged in proper upper middle-class Victorian clothing — they exude a sense of bourgeoisie decorum in pose and attitude. They often appear to float in a dream-like trance through a genteel world.

In this sense, White's *Ring Toss* is the epitome of this sort of pictorial work. The three young women are oblivious to the eye of the camera — the viewer is able to glimpse a moment of activity in the private sphere of the leisure class. The girls are engaged in a 'proper' game for young Victorian females. They concentrate on ring toss. The game is not physically taxing, yet it encourages manners and morals through a structure of 'gentle' competition. It is a form of learning how to compete and excel in a leisure-class world. In this sense, the girls reflect their roles in Victorian society. They politely take turns — there is no heated competition. They sit properly while awaiting their turn, and they delicately throw the rings with feet and limbs in proper positions. They are dressed in the purity of white and sheltered from the natural world, which is symbolized by the bright sunlight burning through the window and its curtains. And apparently their parents can afford to leave a room open for such congenial pursuits — prosperity is implicit.[14]

Again, it must be keep in mind that White was working with the ideas of others in *Ring Toss* — particularly Chase's. In other photographs he, like many of the pictorialists, apparently imitated the works of other painters — although none quite so closely as Chase's *Ring Toss*. Therefore, one cannot separate White and many other pictorialists from the painters of the late nineteenth century and the society they were a part of. The late nineteenth century was a time of industrial and economic expansion — of invention, urbanization, secularization and a new national and international perspective. Between 1865 and 1900 the national wealth quadrupled and the population doubled. With the industrial revolution came a cultural revolution. The increased wealth meant cultural advances in art, literature, science and the social sciences.[15] During this period wide circles began to expect art to be innovative — to break the rules of the academy as well as the tastes of popular culture. Such dissenting yet flamboyant artists as Whistler, John Singer Sargent and Chase began to be cherished by the upper classes.[16]

The late nineteenth century was a period when the newly formed and socially dominant bourgeois class turned inward and looked at itself. These privileged Victorians apparently liked much of what they saw. They celebrated their position and reproduced it visually in snapshots, artisitc photography and other art forms — particularly painting. Many of the artists of the period, as members of the privileged class themselves, also celebrated the 'good life' — the bourgeoisie served as the subjects as well as the patrons of this art. Artists like Whistler, Sargent and Chase not only painted the leisurely, monied life, they lived it as well. And it appears photographers such as White and Stieglitz were as interested in becoming part of the 'high-art' leisure class as they were in producing photographic art. Thus, leisure became respectable — a badge of success. Depictions of leisure most represented the privileged bourgeois life.[17]

Yet, lurking in the new industrial and cultural order were serious problems. Economic power had been centralized in a few hands, leading to such diverse problems as inadequate worker incomes to governmental corruption from the federal down to the local levels. Despite the installation of water, sewage and electrical systems and the paving of streets, urban areas were not the idyllic mecca many bourgeoisie migrating from rural areas might have hoped they would be. During the period immigrant populations from southern and eastern Europe poured into the urban areas.

Figure 2

William Merritt Chase, *Ring Toss*, ca. 1896

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Urban populations grew; class divisions formed; and the city began to be viewed by many as impersonal at best and corrupt and filthy at worst. For the upper middle class, the new "mass society" supported their privileged social position but also damaged the traditional rural, egalitarian American sense of community.[18] A sense of community was replaced by the "feel ... of a small town gone out of control."[19]

Class, in a sense, became community in the new industrial order of mass society — much to the horror of those with established wealth and power preceding the great new fortunes of urban-industrial America. Privilege could be a precarious position. New wealth and values were replacing old. And crusaders, muckrakers and other social reformers were beginning to take action as early as the 1880s. Thus, it is likely the paintings and photographs of the late nineteenth-century leisure class not only celebrated the social positions and values of the privileged, but reaffirmed them as mass society began to take its toll. In this sense paintings and photographs of the late Victorian era likely served as forms of an emerging "therapeutic ethos" — an ethos stressing psychic health and self-realization in an increasingly fragmented and diffused world.[20]

Perhaps this helps explain why one sees so many women and children in the leisure-oriented paintings and photographs of the period. Because of the growth of industrialization and the accompanying wage-labor system in the nineteenth century, men and women divided into distinct spheres of work — work and economy became the male sphere; home and family the female sphere. In marxist terms, men became tied to productive labor while women became tied to reproductive labor. This split led to men and women having distinctly different personalities, according to late nineteenth-century cultural constructions of meaning. As participants in a competitive capitalist economy, men assumed characteristics such as being ruthless and self-seeking. However, women, as "guardians of the family" and "creators of the home," assumed characterisitcs such as self-sacrifice, generosity and sensitivity.[21]

Women were considered to be different from but in many respects equal or even superior to men. In bourgeois circles of the late Victorian era, women were certainly considered more virtuous — the caretakers of morals and manners. They were often considered the "conscious and the housekeepers of America," and their "virtue constituted a national resource."[22] The children of the upper classes were thought of in similar terms — they represented a "salvation born out of innocence" which could lead to a "new, moral America born out of the purity of its children."[23] Thus, the paintings and photographs of privileged women and children were likely more than displays of prosperity. The delicate woman appearing in a Thomas Dewing painting or a Clarence White photograph was more than a late Victorian houshold's "chief ornament," as Thorstein Veblen claimed.[24] She — and her children — also represented the bourgeois hope for a perfect civilization, guiltless and pure, within a mass society.

In closing, Clarence White's *Ring Toss* is a photograph with several layers of meaning. As a form of plagiarism perhaps approaching kitsch, it represents the aspirations of a group of amateur American photographers at the end of the nineteenth century. Pictorialists such as White tried to develop photography into a legitimate 'high art' form by imitating the codes and conventions of painting — from composition and exhibition of works to organization of groups. White's *Ring Toss*, as one of many late Victorian visual artifacts representing private, leisure-oriented, female bourgeois pursuits, also indicates particular perspectives concerning class and gender. Such representations — especially those of women and children — were displays of status, no doubt.

But they may have also offered a sense of hope to a society dominated by patriarchal and capitalist ideals through reaffirming particular bourgeois values and constructions of meaning in a period increasingly fragmented and diffused by the new urban-industrial order.

NOTES

[1]In his articles "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15:3 (Autumn 1980): 197-210; and "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17:1 (Spring 1982): 1-19, Jules David Prown advocates analyzing the styles — the particular forms — of cultural artifacts because "the way in which something is done, produced or expressed" in a society indicates "unstated" constructions of meaning such as "beliefs ... assumptions, attitudes and values." The style of an object is a nonverbal "cultural, stylistic fingerprint." This emphasis on style is a valuable analytical tool for one interested in historical cultural constructions of meaning, but it should not be the sole method of analysis, as Prown occasionally admits.

Thus, this paper includes an analysis of style but grounds it in historical and sociological analyses. In this sense the most problematic area of Prown's method is avoided —that of considering the object as a sort of timeless 'text' through which one can arrive at an "objective" yet "affective" reading similar to its original producer and users. Prown appears to confuse *biological perception* (all humans sense the same objects similarly no matter what the epistemological context) with perception as a *process of constructing meaning* that is always grounded in a particular space and time. In this sense I agree with Janet Wolff, who writes that "... the way in which we 'translate' or interpret particular works is always determined by our own perspective and our own position in ideology. ... In short, the reading of any cultural product is an act of interpretation." See Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1984) pp. 96-97.

[2]See Ulrich F. Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography: An Iconographic Analysis," *History of Photography* 9:1 (January-March 1985), pp. 3-5; and Ronald G. Pisano, *Idle Hours: Americans at Leisure, 1865-1914* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988), pp. 68-69.

[3]Mary Ellen Hayward, "The Influence of the Classical Oriental Tradition on American Painting," *Winterthur Portfolio* 14:2 (Summer 1979), pp. 109-110.

[4]Jules David Prown, *American Painting: From Its Beginnings to the Armory Show* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1987), pp. 107-111.

[5]Richard Boyle, *American Impressionism* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974), p. 148.

[6]See Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters* (New York: Dutton, 1978), pp. 113-127; and Matthew Baigell, *Dictionary of American Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 355-356.

[7]See Pisano, *Idle Hours*, pp. 32-33.

[8]See Van Deren Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph: From Delacroix to Warhol* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), pp. 78-94; and Boyle, *American Impressionism*, pp. 11-30.

[9]The following discussion of pictorialism is primarily based on Ian Jeffrey's *Photography: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 81-104; Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), pp. 141-166; Roberty Doty's *Photo Secession: Photography as a Fine Art*

(New York: George Eastman House, 1960), pp. 9-27; Ulrich Keller's "The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis," *History of Photography* 8:4 (October-December 1984), pp. 249-275; and Christian Peterson's "George Timmins' Early collections of Pictorial Photography," *History of Photography* 6:1 (January 1982), pp. 21-26.

[10]The terms 'bourgeoisie' and 'bourgeois' are often used differently by different scholars. In this paper, a marxist-oriented definition of a class antithetical to the proletariat is used rather than the traditional French definition meaning merely the middle class. Thus, the term 'bourgeois' is interchangeable with the phrase *upper* middle-class throughout this text.

[11]Much of the following backgrounding of White's life is based on Jerry Mason, ed., *The International Center of Photography Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1984), pp. 556-558; Jeffrey Ians, *Photography*, pp. 94-96; and Bonnie Yochelson, "Clarence H. White Reconsidered: An Alternative to the Modernist Aesthetic of Straight Photography," *Studies in Visual Communication* 9:4 (Fall 1983), pp. 26-44.

[12]Boyle, *American Impressionism*, p. 133.

[13]White's role as an influential instructor of many successful American art, commercial and mass media photographers is an interesting topic, but beyond the scope of this paper. For an analysis of how White influenced commercial photography in the 1920s through the 1940s, see Bonnie Yochelson's "Clarence White Reconsidered" in *Studies in Visual Communication*.

[14]See Ronald Pisano's *Idle Hours*, pp. 66-80, for an interesting discussion of late nineteenth-century bourgeois children, games and painting.

[15]Michael and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America*, 6th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988), pp. 184-188.

[16]Russell Lynes, *The Art Makers* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), pp. 408-409, 423-431.

[17]Pisano, *Idle Hours: Americans at Leisure*, pp. 1-4, 49.

[18]Garth S. Jowett, "The Emergence of the Mass Society: The Standardization of American Culture, 1830-1920," *Prospects* 7 (1982), pp. 207-225.

[19]Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 170.

[20]For a discussion of "therapeutic ethos," see T. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Realization," in Fox and Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 1-38.

[21]Julie A. Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), pp. 115-116.

[22]Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, p. 173.

[23]Anne Tropp Trensky, "The Saintly Child in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction," *Prospects* 1 (1975), pp. 412.

[24]Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. reprint (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), p. 179.